

At page 22, line 2, delete "eliminate" and insert therefor
-- eliminates --.

At page 22, line 26, after "teachings." insert the following:

A3 ~~-- For example, those of ordinary skill in the art will understand from the description above that any continuous web (whether cylindrical or oval in shape, or having other shapes) which is folded along its length (whether V-folded or not) and which has two open edges that can be sealed together can be used to provide hermetically sealed individual food slices, according to the present invention. --~~

IN THE CLAIMS:

Please cancel Claims 1-8, without prejudice to reinstate.

Please add new Claims 9-21, as follows:

A4 1/9. A process for automatically and continuously packaging a food item into hermetically sealed individual slices, comprising the steps of:

providing a continuous web of heat-sealable plastic material extending lengthwise, the web having front and rear sheets, a web width defined by the distance the web extends transverse to the web length, and two edges extending along the web length that can be sealed together;

folding the web about the web length;

moving the web in a forward direction;

sealing the edges of the web to form a longitudinal hermetic seal, thereby defining a continuous tubular web;

inserting the food item into the tubular web;

flattening the web after the food item is inserted to form a continuous slice of the flattened food item disposed between the front and rear sheets of the web;

urging the front and rear sheets of the web together at predetermined intervals along the flattened web to define a plurality of cross-sealing zones, and applying sufficient pressure at the cross-sealing zones to remove substantially all of the food item from between the front and rear sheets;

forming a plurality of hermetically sealed cross-seals at the cross-sealing zones by heating the web at the cross-sealing zones for a period of time and at a temperature sufficient to hermetically seal the front and rear sheets of the web together at the cross-sealing zones, the cross-seals each extending continuously along the web width to form, together with the longitudinal hermetic seals, hermetically sealed packages entirely enclosing the individual slices of the food item; and

cooling the web after the web is flattened and before the cross-seals are formed.

2/10. The process of Claim 1, wherein the web is continually moved in a forward direction during the sealing of the web edges and during the formation of the cross-seals.

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~~11.~~

An apparatus for packaging a food item into individual slices, comprising:

A4 Cont...
means for folding a continuous web of thermoplastic material extending lengthwise, the web having front and rear sheets, a web width defined by the distance the web extends transverse to the web length, and two edges extending along the web length that can be sealed together;

a longitudinal sealing station that continuously forms a hermetic longitudinal seal that joins the two edges of the web, thereby defining a continuous tubular web;

means for inserting the food item into the continuous tubular web of plastic material;

a device for continuously flattening the web with the inserted food item inside the web to form a continuous slice of the flattened food item disposed between the front and rear sheets of the web;

a cross-sealing station disposed downstream of the longitudinal sealing station for urging the front and rear sheets of the web together at predetermined intervals along the flattened web to define a plurality of cross-sealing zones, and for applying sufficient pressure at the cross-sealing zones to remove substantially all of the food item from the cross-sealing zones, the cross-sealing station forming a plurality of hermetically sealed cross-seals at the cross-sealing zones by heating the web at the

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cont...

cross-sealing zones for a period of time and at a temperature sufficient to hermetically seal the front and rear sheets of the web together at the cross-sealing zones, the cross-seals separating adjacent food item slices and each extending continuously along the web width to form, together with the longitudinal hermetic seals, hermetically sealed packages entirely enclosing the individual slices of the food item;

means for continuously conveying the web from the longitudinal sealing station to the cross-sealing station; and

means for cooling the web after the web is flattened and before the cross-seals are formed.

⁴/₁₂. The apparatus of Claim ³/₁₁, wherein the food item is cheese.

⁵/₁₃. The apparatus of Claim ³/₁₁, wherein the plastic material includes polypropylene.

⁶/₁₄. The apparatus of Claim ³/₁₁, wherein the plastic material is a thermoplastic that includes a high density polyethylene layer coextruded with a polyethylene sealant layer having an intermediate adhesive layer.

⁷/₁₅. The apparatus of Claim ⁶/₁₄, wherein the temperature used to hermetically the cross-seals is between about 230°F and 240°F.

~~8~~³ 16. The apparatus of Claim ~~11~~³, wherein the length of each cross-seal between adjacent cheese slices is approximately one-quarter inch.

A4 Cont...
~~9~~³ 17. The apparatus of Claim ~~11~~³, wherein the means for cooling the web includes a tank containing water at a temperature of approximately between 32°F and 50°F.

~~10~~³ 18. The apparatus of Claim ~~11~~³, wherein the cross-sealing station includes first and second sealing members, with at least one of the sealing members being capable of being heated, and one of the sealing members being made of a softer material than the other sealing member.

~~11~~³ 19. A process for automatically and continuously packaging a food item into hermetically sealed individual slices, comprising the steps of:

providing a continuous web of heat-sealable plastic material extending lengthwise, the web having front and rear sheets, a web width defined by the distance the web extends transverse to the web length, and two edges extending along the web length that can be sealed together;

folding the web about the web length;

continuously moving the web in a forward direction;

sealing the edges of the web as the web is continuously moved forward to form a longitudinal hermetic seal, thereby defining a continuous tubular web;

inserting the food item into the tubular web;

flattening the web after the food item is inserted to form a continuous slice of the flattened food item disposed between the front and rear sheets of the web;

cooling the web;

urging the front and rear sheets of the web together at predetermined intervals along the flattened web to define a plurality of cross-sealing zones, and applying sufficient pressure at the cross-sealing zones to remove substantially all of the food item from between the front and rear sheets, as the web is continuously moved forward; and

forming a plurality of hermetically sealed cross-seals at the cross-sealing zones by heating the web at the cross-sealing zones for a period of time and at a temperature sufficient to hermetically seal the front and rear sheets of the web together at the cross-sealing zones as the web is continuously moved forward, the cross-seals each extending continuously along the web width to form, together with the longitudinal hermetic seals, hermetically sealed packages entirely enclosing the individual slices of the food item.